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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 121ST INFANTRY,
(8TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON PLEURTUIT,
FRANCE, AND DEFENSE OF AN AREA OUTSIDE OF PLEURTUIT,
7 - 12 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION ATTACKING A
TOWN AND HOLDING A DEFENSIVE POSITION OUTSIDE OF THE TOWN.

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, 8th Infantry Division in an attack on PLEURTUIT, FRANCE and defense of an area outside of PLEURTUIT 7-12 August 1944, during the Northern France Campaign.

In order to orient the reader it will be necessary to discuss briefly the main events which led up to this action.

On 6 June 1944 successful airborne and seaborne landings were accomplished by Allied American and British forces in the country of FRANCE. (See Map A) This Allied invasion force consisted of the United States First Army and the British Second Army under the command of the 21st British Army Group. The link up between airborne and land forces was made and a foothold had been secured on French soil. (1) By 6 August 1944 (D + 60) Allied forces had made substantial gains into enemy held EUROPE. (See Map B) The United States Third Army had become operational on 1 August 1944. (2)

On 4 July 1944 the 8th Infantry Division, after six months training in Northern IRELAND, landed in FRANCE. The division was assigned to VIII Corps, First U.S. Army and was committed to action on 8 July 1944 when it passed through elements of the 82d Airborne Division and elements of the 90th Infantry

(1) A-1, p. 48
(2) A-3

Division in the vicinity of LA HAYE DU PULIS. (See Map B) (3)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

By 6 August 1944 the 8th Division (-) was located at RENNES, FRANCE. The 121st Infantry Combat Team with the 56th Field Artillery Battalion attached was placed in VIII Corps reserve in the vicinity of ST. JAMES, FRANCE. (See Map B) (4) The VIII Corps was now part of the Third U.S. Army. (5) On 6 August 1944 it was estimated by Third Army intelligence that the enemy would withdraw to fortified ports with continuing sporadic resistance to delay the Army's advance. On the eastern front of the Army the enemy was expected to combine a defense east of the MAYENNE RIVER with a counterattack in the MORTAIN area with the intent of serving the Army's north and south forces and make the latter untenable logistically. (See Map B) (6)

On 6 August, Third Army was directed by 12th U.S. Army Group to advance from the line of the MAYENNE RIVER to secure crossings on the SARTHE RIVER from ANGERS to LE MANS and be prepared to push strong armored forces in the direction of the ORLEANS-PARIS gap. NANTES and ANGERS were to be occupied and the south flank of the Army was to be watched for possible enemy crossings over the SOIRE RIVER. (See Map B) (7)

In the VIII Corps area armored spearheads had raced across BRITTANY and reached the outskirts of BREST and LORIENT. Indications were that BREST was being prepared for a determined

(3) A-2, p. 26, 27

(4) A-2, p. 31

(5) A-3

(6) A-3

(7) A-3

defense. (See Map B) (8)

On 6 August 1944 the Regimental Commander, Colonel John R. Jeter received orders attaching the 121st Infantry Combat Team to the 83d Infantry Division. The 83d Division was then engaged in an attack on the fortified coastal town of ST.

Rest Mission
MALO. The 121st Combat Team was given the mission of attacking the town of DINARD across the bay from ST. MALO from which fire of enemy coastal guns and artillery was greatly impeding the attack of the 83d Division. (See Map C) (9)

The 121st Infantry had suffered heavy casualties during its thirty days of fighting. A few replacements had been received but many key personnel had been lost. Rifle company strengths were from 90 to 100 men. In spite of this situation morale was excellent. The Regiment was adequately supplied and equipped. (10)

The enemy confronting the 83d Division at ST. MALO and DINARD were elements of the German 77th Division, a high caliber German unit, well stocked with ammunition and food. (11) At 0600 hours 7 August the 121st Infantry Combat Team was motorized and preceded by the 83d Reconnaissance Troop and the Regimental I & R Platoon moved toward the town of DINARD. (See Map C) The combined reconnaissance unit encountered an enemy patrol near PLOUER. (See Map ^C~~B~~) After exchange of fire the enemy patrol withdrew, and the motor march continued. The reconnaissance unit was again met by fire emanating from the town of TREMEREU. (See Map C) This fire was of such volume that the reconnaissance outfit could not

(8) A-3

(9) A-2, p. 33

(10) Personal knowledge; Statement by Lt. B.L. Kersey, then Asst Regimental Adjutant, 121st Infantry, on 22 Feb. 1950

(11) A-4

overcome it and the Regiment detrucked at PLESLIN. (See Map C) (12)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF 121ST INFANTRY

The Regiment after detrucking at PLESLIN moved out on the road in a column of battalions, 3d, 2d and 1st toward the town of TREMEREUC and the Regimental objective, the city of DINARD. (See Map C) (13)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 3d Battalion moved out in a column of companies, L, I, M and K with the Battalion Command Group at the rear of L Company. (14)

NARRATION

About 500 yards from the town of TREMEREUC the leading elements of L Company were fired on by rifles and machine guns, soon followed by mortar fire. Through the support of artillery and mortar fire, L Company gained the town and the enemy withdrew. (See Map D) Orders were received to occupy the town and halt for the night and continue the attack at 0700 hours, 8 August. (15) The town of PLEURTUIT had been selected as an initial Regimental objective, to be followed by the capture of DINARD the final objective. The Regimental plan of attack was with the 3d and 2d Battalions astride the highway with the 3d Battalion on the left and the 1st Battalion

(12) A-2, p. 33

(13) Statement of Lt Col R. W. Hogan, National Guard, then Major, Executive Officer, 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, on 22 February 1950

(14) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lt. Col. R. W. Hogan, (NG) then Major, Executive Officer, 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, on 22 February 1950

(15) Personal knowledge

in reserve to follow the 2d Battalion. (See Map D) (16)

Patrols were sent out that night and they reported a net work of concrete pillboxes and log bunker emplacements, iron rail obstacles and concerting^{ing} wire in the 3d Battalion's zone of attack. Intermittent artillery and mortar fire was received during the night. (17) *NARRATION*

At 0700 hours, 8 August the 3d and 2d Battalions jumped off in the attack with the 1st Battalion in reserve. The 2d Battalion was stopped cold when they came up against direct fire from concrete pillboxes, protected by mines. The 3d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Eyler, had little more success until around noon it succeeded in breaking through an iron rail road block flanked by log bunker emplacements on the left flank. (See Map D) After the breakthrough the battalion moved down the road in a column of companies, L, I, M and K toward the town of PLEURTUIT. (See Map D) The terrain was generally flat typical French hedgerow country. The advance continued uninterrupted. Firing could be heard off on the right flank. (18)

Leading elements of Company L entered the outskirts of PLEURTUIT without any resistance or any noticeable sign of enemy activity or presence. The Battalion Commander came up to L Company Commander and told him to move on into the town that the battalion would spend the night here and wait for the rest of the Regiment to catch up. Company L continued to move on into the town. The remainder of the battalion was still in column on the road. Still there were no signs of enemy existence which had begun to arouse a suspicious uneasiness. Lead-

(16) A-2, p. 96

(17) Personal knowledge

(18) Personal knowledge

ing elements of L Company came to the main road, the one which the Regiment had attacked astride of that morning, and turned left toward the city of DINARD with a column on each side of the street. (See Map D) The Battalion Commander and L Company Commander were standing about 100 yards from the road intersection where L Company was turning toward DINARD, and L Company Commander was receiving instructions for the defensive organization of PLEURTUIT for the night. About two platoons of L Company had made the turn toward DINARD and at this point the quietness was broken and the town became very much alive. A German tank came out from behind a building and moved toward the head of L Company firing as it moved. Machine gun and rifle fire started coming down from upstairs windows and doorways. The tank came on down the street, firing as it moved. Upon reaching the road intersection where L Company had entered the town and turned left toward DINARD, it stopped, traversed its 88 mm gun in the direction of the Battalion Command Group and let go with three rounds. Two men were killed and two wounded. The Battalion Commander then ordered L Company Commander to pull his two platoons back out of the town. The L Company withdrawal was far from an orderly, well executed movement. Four men had been killed and three men wounded. Company L finally got out of the town and joined the battalion. The Germans made no effort to follow up L Company's withdrawal from the town. The Battalion Commander then ordered the battalion to take up a defensive position about 400 yards southeast of the railroad track astride the road the Battalion had used to advance on PLEURTUIT. (See Map D) (19) The balance of the battalion closed in including a section of Regimental

(19) Personal knowledge

Anti-Tank guns that were attached to the Battalion, also the A & P Platoon with a German truck that had been captured some time before and used to haul extra ammunition. The Battalion S-4 was sent back to bring up the Battalion Surgeon and his Aid Station. The Battalion Commander planned to attack the town the next morning. Around 0500 hours, 9 August, the Anti-Tank Platoon Leader sent two men with a jeep and trailer to the rear for more ammunition for his Anti-Tank guns. As they approached the road block the battalion had breached yesterday they saw that iron rails had been replaced across the road and several men around the road block. They identified the men as Germans and almost immediately they were fired on. They were forced to abandon the jeep and made their way back to battalion and reported to the Battalion Commander that they thought we had been cut off from the rear. The Battalion Commander notified Regiment by radio and sent a patrol to verify the report. The patrol was driven back and also reported the road block had been replaced and was strongly defended. It was also learned from Regiment that the Battalion Surgeon and Aid Station had found the road block closed and were not able to get through. The Regimental Commander ordered the Battalion Commander to organize and hold his present position. (20) The Battalion Commander then organized the battalion in a perimeter defense with L Company on the left of the road, I Company on the right and K Company around the rear. M Company's machine guns were attached to the rifle companies and the Anti-Tank guns (two) were put into position in L Company's area covering the road toward PLEURTUIT. (See Map E) The Battalion artillery liaison officer immediately boxed in the Battalion

(20) Statement of Lt Col R.W. Hogan (NG), then Major, Executive Officer, 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, on 22 February 1950

perimeter with defensive fires. (21)

Around 0800 hours that morning, 9 August, K Company received small arms fire from the rear. This was an enemy patrol that soon withdrew, after a short exchange of fire.

(See Map E)

Around 1000 hours about fifteen Germans were seen crawling along the ditches of the road coming out of PLEURTUIT.

(See Map E) The Germans had pieces of grey blanket tied on their backs extending from their shoulders to their feet. This effort to camouflage failed completely to blend in with the surrounding vegetation and color scheme. Companies L and I withheld their fire until the enemy was about 200 yards away. Three Germans were killed and several wounded and they withdrew back toward the town. About thirty minutes later a heavy artillery and mortar barrage hit the battalion area. The Battalion CP located near the middle of the area in a small one story French house, (See Map E) received two direct hits which killed the Battalion S-3, the Battalion Motor Officer, one Battalion runner and wounded the Battalion Operations Sergeant. Immediately following this artillery and mortar barrage a German Mark IV tank with about twelve infantrymen came out of PLEURTUIT down the road toward the battalion. The tank opened fire at about 400 yards range with the infantry keeping to the rear of the tank. At about 300 yard range the 57 mm Anti-Tank guns, located in L Company's area, opened up and scored two hits on the tank. Upon being hit the tank pulled off into the ditch and the crew abandoned it. The tank was later set on fire by our artillery fire. The infantry deployed in front of L Company and after about a twenty minute fire fight withdrew

(21) Personal knowledge

back toward the town of PLEURTUIT. (See Map E) By this time wounded casualties were beginning to add up. As previously stated the Battalion Surgeon and Aid Station were unable to get through to the battalion. The Battalion Commander took the medical aid men from the companies and had them set up an Aid Station in a French farm house located to the rear of the Battalion CP. (See Map E) Medical supplies and equipment were limited to just what the aid men carried with them. The Battalion Commander then called in all the SCR 300 radios from the companies to conserve the batteries for communication with regiment. The battalion artillery liaison officer also had radio communication to his battalion and regiment.

The balance of the day, 9 August, passed with intermittent artillery and mortar fire coming into the battalion area.

Around daybreak on 10 August a patrol hit the flank of I Company but was driven off and two wounded prisoners were captured. Upon interrogation they stated they had been sent to PLEURTUIT from DINARD in the evening of the previous day. No other information was gained. (22)

Information from regiment revealed that the 1st and 2d Battalions had made little or no progress and orders were to hold the present position. (23)

Around 1500 hours, 10 August, a heavy artillery pounding came in, followed by the sound of tanks off L Company's left flank. Two German tanks with about thirty infantrymen attacked L Company's flank. (See Map E) The tanks laid off at a distance of about 200 to 300 yards and fired while the infantrymen advanced. A heavy fire fight was engaged and the enemy attack was

(22) Personal knowledge

(23) Statement by Lt Col R.W. Hogan (NG) then Major, Executive Officer, 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, on 22 Feb. 1950

finally broken up by our artillery fire and withdrew. Two officer platoon leaders of L Company were killed during this action, one by the preceding artillery barrage and the other by small arms fire. (24)

During the night of 9-10 August the 331st Infantry of the 83d Division with an attached company of tanks and a company of tank destroyers were pulled out of the action at ST. MALO and moved around through DINAN and committed to the left of the 3d Battalion. (25)

The next day, 11 August, the number of wounded had increased and medical supplies were becoming critical. Arrangements were made by radio for two liaison planes from the 56th Field Artillery to fly over and drop blood plasma and other medical supplies. That afternoon two liaison planes came over and circled the area. While circling and maneuvering to come in low over the selected drop zone the two planes locked wings and came down to earth in a flaming crash. Three First Lieutenants and one Second Lieutenant, two in each plane were killed. (26)

Around 2200 hours, 11 August, a patrol hit I Company's flank. (See Map F) Company I fired on the patrol and it immediately withdrew. The Battalion Commander became a little suspicious since this had been the second patrol to hit I Company and strengthened the flank of the company with a section of heavy machine guns. His suspicions were correct for around 2400 hours the Germans launched an attack against the flank of Company I. (See Map F) The Germans used no supporting fires prior to this attack which was estimated to be of Battalion (-)

(24) Personal knowledge

(25) A-2, p. 35

(26) Personal knowledge

in strength. Heavy fighting followed for the next two hours with some fire being exchanged almost at point blank range. The Battalion Commander took two squads from K Company and held them as a mobile reserve. The Germans made a penetration into I Company at one point and I Company fell back about fifty yards. The Battalion Commander reinforced I Company with the two reserve squads of K Company and I Company's line was restored. Around 0200 hours the enemy withdrew, leaving their dead and many wounded behind. The next morning around 1100 hours, 12 August, a patrol from K Company was sent out to the left flank in hopes of contacting elements of the 331st Infantry. After two days of hard fighting the 331st broke through the German fortifications and the K Company patrol contacted Company A of the 331st Infantry. (See Map F) Company A was commanded by Major Barbour, then Captain Barbour. Contact was then established with our own regiment. (27)

To sum up the results of this action, although the 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry had not captured the town of PLEURTUIT, it had successfully carried out its assigned mission of holding the ground that it had gained. From 8 to 12 August the battalion had withstood four counterattacks, two of which were supported by tanks. The battalion had taken a merciless pounding by enemy artillery and mortars. Proper medical care was not available for the wounded. Rations consisted of K type that the men carried on their person and that which happened to be on some vehicles. Many men had had nothing to eat for two days. Water was available from a well at the French farm house which served as an aid station. Very few rounds of

(27) Statement of Lt Col R.W. Hogan (NG) then Major, Executive Officer, 3d Battalion, 121st Infantry, on 22 Feb 1950

ammunition of any caliber remained in the battalion. The battalion had five officers killed and two others wounded and ninety some men killed and wounded.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

Due to the situation and circumstances, supply and evacuation did not exist and although supply by air was attempted it is felt that the battalion could have been supplied by air with rations, ammunition and medical supplies. Had the captured German truck which the battalion carried extra ammunition on not been present, the battalion could not have held its position.

2. FAILURE TO EXPLOIT A BREAKTHROUGH

It is felt that had the reserve battalion been used to follow up and exploit the breakthrough made by the 3d Battalion on 8 August, this costly situation might not have happened.

3. ANTI-TANK WEAPONS

At the time when Company L had two platoons in the town of PLEURTUIT and the German tank rolled down the street not one single anti-tank weapon was present in these two platoons. Had a bazooka or anti-tank grenades been present and utilized the tank could have been knocked out at close range and would have probably changed the entire course of coming events.

4. PATROLS

Although the battalion was short of personnel and under-

strength it is felt that much more active and vigorous patrolling could have been conducted from both the 3d Battalion and the remainder of the regiment.

5. FAILURE OF ADJACENT UNITS TO ADVANCE

Through the inability of the balance of the regiment to advance placed the 3d Battalion in a projected position and loss of flank contact.

6. LACK OF INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION

W/ED Intelligence information of the enemy was so vague or faulty that it was initially planned that one battalion of the 121st Infantry would be able to take the town of DINARD and was planned to the extent of dividing the town of DINARD into company sectors. Two infantry regiments, a company of tanks and a company of tank destroyers were employed in the capture of the town of DINARD.

7. FAILURE OF GERMANS TO ATTACK IN FORCE WITH ARMOR

✓ Had the Germans followed up the withdrawal of L Company from the town of PLEURTUIT with armor and infantry it would have hit the battalion in a vulnerable condition and somewhat disorganized.

Other German attacks, except the one night attack against Company I, lacked force and aggressiveness, especially in the employment of armor.

LESSONS

1. Keep Aid Station well up with the Battalion.

2. A breakthrough or success must be exploited.
3. Anti-tank weapons must be available at all times.
4. Vigorous patrolling must be conducted when contact with friendly units has been lost.
5. Failure of adjacent units to advance can result in a costly projection by a unit that advances beyond contact.
6. Intelligence information of the enemy should be accurate and complete.
7. Failure of the Germans to employ their armor and infantry aggressively and in force was to our advantage.